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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/29/2014

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SUBJECT: RUNAWAY SAUDI MAID ISSUE CONTINUES TO RAISE DEBATE
OVER SPONSORSHIP SYSTEM AND CALL ATTENTION TO ABUSES

REF: 08JEDDAH501

Classified By: CG Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

SUBJECT: Runaway Saudi Maid Issue Continues to Raise Debate
over Sponsorship System and Call Attention to Abuses

11. (C) SUMMARY: The issue of foreign domestic workers fleeing from the homes of their employers remains a hot topic in Saudi Arabia. A well-connected labor lawyer explained to Poloff that workers are being lured by organized groups encouraging illegal work and prostitution. A private Saudi advertising campaign and comments by the Minister of Labor recently addressed the need for Saudis to treat foreign domestic workers with respect. Evidence from multiple sources continues to allege common abuse by employers towards domestic workers, largely encouraged through the employer sponsorship system. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) MAIDS RUNAWAY: Saudi media sources have for years discussed what is seen as a significant labor problem, the fact that a significant number of foreign housemaids run away from the houses of their employers every year. The full extent of the problem is unclear: according to a March 31, 2008 Arab News account, there are 7,000 runaway maids (or less than 1% of the total) in the Kingdom, among an estimate of 1 million total housemaids, the largest number of whom are Indonesian. On the other hand, a European human rights researcher and activist who has studied the problem extensively both in Saudi Arabia and in sending countries recently told post she estimates there are as many as 2 million foreign domestic workers in the country, including illegals, and that the annual total of runaways is probably at least 20,000. Media sources speculate on the question of whether the runaways leave owing to abuse or are lured because of outside work opportunities.

13. (SBU) WELL DOCUMENTED ABUSES AGAINST DOMESTIC LABOR: Abuse of foreign labor, in particular domestic servants is a well-documented problem in the Kingdom. Local and foreign press, the diplomatic community, human rights organizations, the 2008 TIP report on Saudi Arabia, as well as Saudi governmental sources (although to a lesser extent) document the wide range of problems that maids and other domestic workers face. In particular there are a significant number of laborers whose passports are held by the employer or sponsor. Payment for services is then sometimes not provided for long periods of time, but promised only at the end of the year or of the contract. In some cases, domestic workers are not allowed to leave the house

unescorted or are not permitted to leave at all. The criteria for labor trafficking and exploitation are often met in such instances.

14. (C) On January 13, Poloff met with Dr. Tareq Hamood Al-Ibrahim (please protect), a Jeddah-based labor lawyer and member of the board of directors at the Jeddah Center for Law and Arbitration (part of the Jeddah Chamber for Commerce and Industry). Al-Ibrahim offered some useful commentary on the situation.

15. (C) UNDER SPONSORSHIP SYSTEM, EMPLOYER FEARS LEAD TO NONPAYMENT: According to Al-Ibrahim, the high costs (as much as 7000 Riyals or close to \$2000) of legally sponsoring a foreign maid discourages families from paying workers who fear that fully paid employees will run away for the purpose of finding better-paid work. Al-Ibrahim explained that working illegally will usually bring higher wages since an employer who has not paid the recruitment, sponsorship, and flight costs is willing to give a higher monthly salary to a runaway worker. The gamble of getting caught and the associated 10,000 Riyal fine (one 2007 media source claims 20,000 Riyals) per illegal worker may be worth it to the employer since the fine may actually be less than all the associated costs of bringing over a legal worker. Al-Ibrahim claims that since employers are afraid that housemaids will run away, there are many cases of domestic employees not receiving any wages for months or even much longer. The employee is often promised payment at the end of the year and often will stay under these conditions due to fear that if they abscond they will receive nothing.

16. (SBU) ORGANIZED ILLEGAL LABOR RING LURES DOMESTICS: Media sources suggest that some foreign maids run away in order to enter prostitution or other illegal work. There is reportedly a well-organized system, primarily run by Indonesians, to lure housemaids into outside work including prostitution, but more often to work as domestics for higher wages. According to sources, these organizations use a promise of better pay and assure the domestic worker that she can leave at any time. The organizations profit by taking a percentage of the worker's salary. Post has heard that a similar network exists among Filipino expatriates. Women solicited by these organizations are not necessarily trafficked since the decision is often voluntary on the part of the worker. However, too little information currently exists on the functioning of these organizations to insure that they are not coercing domestic workers into servitude or prostitution.

17. (SBU) TREAT LABORERS WELL AND THEY WILL STAY: Local and international press recently reported on the private campaign of "Full Stop Advertising" in which the organization launched a public campaign informing Saudis of labor abuses and their obligations to treat workers with respect. The campaign was focused primarily on the plight of domestic workers. The same Arab News article mentioned above notes a need to pamper maids if an employer wishes them to stay. The article mentions a man who had several maids run away. He admits to having locked maids in their rooms and then later realized that higher pay and better treatment would have been enough to keep them from fleeing. Minister of Labor Ghazi Al-Gosaibi recently contended that most Saudis hold racist attitudes against foreigners. The widely publicized comment created a firestorm of controversy, but was later confirmed by a survey indicating that a majority of Saudis supported the Minister's opinion.

18. (C) COMMENT: There is a sense from the media and from discussion with Saudis that domestic workers are not considered trustworthy and are viewed as primarily concerned with maximizing financial gain. Even if only 1-2 percent of foreign domestic workers run away, the number is large enough to create a significant social problem. There is little doubt that many domestics remain with their Saudi employers due to fear of adverse legal consequences and coercion rather than job satisfaction. A free market labor system would be more likely to remove the financial risk to employers and the

vulnerability of domestic workers. In such a system, a Saudi employer (after paying a fee) could choose an employee while the employee would be free to choose or to change employers at will. Although the Ministry of Labor mentioned a long term interest in ending the sponsorship system, there is no evidence that reform is a realistic possibility(reftel). Poloff discussion with Saudi contacts reveals great skepticism about the idea of changing the current system. To post's knowledge no alternative system of recruiting or hiring domestic help is being seriously weighed by the SAG in the near term. END COMMENT.

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